THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Taking the First Step

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Maybe the real scariness of conversion lies in admitting that God can work in us however, whenever, and through whatever means God chooses ... a daily and lifelong process.... It does not mean seeking out the most exotic spiritual experience, or the ideal religion, the holiest teachers who will give us the greatest return on our investment. Conversion is seeing ourselves, and the ordinary people in our families, our classrooms, and on the job, in a new light. Can it be that these very people – even the difficult, unbearable ones – are the ones God has given us, so that together we might find salvation?

Kathleen Norris
Amazing Grace

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TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Acts 1:6-11; John 5:2-9

"Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'" John 5:8

Dear God, you come to us in ways we do not always understand. You come to us sometimes when we do not expect you, or even want you. But now, as we are together in worship, we ask you to come. Speak the word you have for us today. Startle us with your truth and your urgency and your love: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Mitch Albom, of *The Detroit Free Press*, is one of the best sportswriters in the country. In fact, his fellow Associated Press editors have voted him America's number one sports columnist ten times. Last year, however, Mitch Albom wrote a book, a very different kind of book, which has become a best seller: *Tuesdays With Morrie: An Old Man, A Young Man, And Life's Greatest Lesson*. Mitch Albom, the author, is the young man. The old man is Morrie – Professor Morrie Schwartz, who was Albom's favorite teacher at Brandeis University. Professor Schwartz was dying – Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), Lou Gehrig's disease.

Albom heard that his old professor was sick, contacted him and arranged a visit. A remarkable relationship began, teacher-learner, but then deepening to compassion, affection, and finally, love. The two agreed to meet weekly, on Tuesdays, for as long as possible, which meant as long as Professor Schwartz's life lasted. Both knew, of course, that time was short. The plan was for Professor Schwartz to teach his last class to his pupil. The subject is dying – and, of course, living. Ted Koppel heard about Professor Schwartz and interviewed him for his television show twice. Perhaps you saw him.

> "Dying is only one thing to be sad over," Morrie tells Mitch at one of their early sessions. "Living unhappily is something else. So many of the people who come to me are unhappy." [p. 35]

> "The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to something that gives you purpose and meaning." [p. 43]

Their Tuesday conversations focus on Regrets, Family, Death, Emotion, Aging, Mourning, as Professor Schwartz's illness progresses and he becomes weaker and more debilitated.

On the second Tuesday Mitch asks Morrie if he felt sorry for himself. Morrie, at this point in his journey with progressive illness, was beginning to experience the very real debilitation of his disease, less and less able to take care of his own basic needs, more and more dependent on a small army of care givers.

> "Do you ever feel sorry for yourself?"

"Sometimes in the morning....That's when I mourn. I feel around my body, I move my fingers and hands – whatever I can still move – and I mourn what I've lost. I mourn the slow, insidious way in which I'm dying. But then I stop mourning."

"Just like that?"

"I give myself a good cry if I need it. But then I concentrate on all the good things still in my life. On the people who are coming to see me. On the stories I'm going to hear. Mitch, I don't allow myself any more self-pity than that. A little each morning, a few tears, and that's all." [pp. 56-57]

Professor Schwartz lived and loved and taught every day of his life until his death. As I finished the book (and you can read the whole thing on a cross-country flight if you're fortunate enough to sit beside someone who doesn't want to talk), as I finished it up, a few weeks ago, I was turning my attention to the text for this Sunday's sermon, the wonderful story in the Fourth Gospel about the old man and the Pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem and the young man who inserts himself into the old man's pathetic life. I was struck by the similarities and the contrasts.

This man has been lying on his mat for 38 years – that's about Professor Schwartz's entire career, about the average number of years people work before retiring. Lying on his mat there by the pool has been his life's work. Don't you love this guy? Four decades, lying on his mat. Distinguished New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says that he'd be funny if he weren't so pathetic. He's no longer even trying, or even asking for help, for that matter. The young man – Jesus – has to force the subject, intrude, as it were. Jesus sees him and asks, rather bluntly and not very compassionately, "Do you want to be made well?"

We ministers take courses to teach us never to ask a blunt, direct, presumptuous question like that. We learn to say, "You must be in a lot of discomfort. You must get very discouraged, sitting there day in and day out, all alone. Why don't you tell me your story – share your experience?" Never – "Do you really want to be well? Are you actually serious about changing all of this?"

You have to suspect that the man wasn't, not really interested at all in change. You have to believe that he is resigned, he's given up any hope that his situation will improve. He's accommodated and now rather enjoys his life. There are compensations, after all. He's got his companions who are sitting on their mats. Passersby often give them alms, enough to buy bread every day. It's actually rather pleasant, lying there by the pool.

The story is remarkable. Jesus never mentions the superstition about the pool. When the spring that fed the pool became active and the surface of the water became roiled, people believed the pool had sudden curative power. So people gathered around the pool waiting and when the water became agitated, tried to be the first in the water to receive its restorative therapy.

"Do you want to be healed?"

"Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool. Someone always steps in front of me."

Jesus never even acknowledges the pool's healing power; neither criticizes it as superstition or makes helpful suggestions, as I want to do, about how better to access the pool: sit closer, keep one leg in all the time just in case, build a little sliding board – there must be some way to "problem solve" here. Jesus ignores the whole business.

And he ignores the man's condition. We never do know what the nature of his problem is, only that he's been there for 38 years, being victimized by it.

What's actually wrong? Since we don't know, we're free to speculate. I think his problem is fear. I think this man is scared to death. Scared to change. Scared to ask for help. Scared to take chances any more. He's resigned and he's morally and physically paralyzed.

One of the early pioneers of psychotherapy, Otto Rank, taught that some of the people he treated were in captivity to what he called "life fear," which he defined as "fear of living autonomously, fear of being abandoned, fear of self-actualization; the need for dependence on someone else." That sounds like this man – he's afraid of life.

And he lost his passion for life long ago. There is no joy left, no commitment to anything, no courage, of course, just day in, day out resignation to fate, to what he may even think is God's will for him, or simply lousy luck.

Theologian Jurgan Moltman wrote a little book, *The Passion for Life*, in which he observes,

> "Apathy seems to be a characteristic sign of the illness of our society. The courage to be is weakened. We must learn to love life with such a passion that we will no longer become accustomed to the power of destruction." [pp. 21-22]

In the final analysis the man has given up caring about his own life, its value, its purpose and meaning. And my conclusion is that the whole business irritates Jesus. Elsewhere people beg him for healing, for restoration of health. Elsewhere he is gentle and kind. He sees this pathetic character and initiates the exchange: "Do you want to be healed?" And when the man starts to whine about how he can't get into the pool quickly enough, Jesus interrupts him.

> "Get up – stand up, take you mat and walk."

And to his everlasting credit, the old man does just that. Takes the biggest risk in his life: takes the first step: away from his victimization, away from the ritualized rehearsed attempts to scramble into the pool which he knows, and so does everybody else, are just for appearances, takes a huge step away from the security of life on his mat, the comfortable dependence on the alms of others and the camaraderie and mutual support of the community of suffering around the pool: takes a first step, which could quite possibly result in falling down and embarrassment and maybe even injury. It took courage to risk that first step. And now I can't help but admire his bravery.

Let's think about that, about his bravery. The late Rollo May wrote a lot about what it takes to become a human being. In a little book, *The Courage to Create*, he observed:

> "In human beings, courage is necessary to make being and becoming possible. An assertion of the self, a commitment, is essential if the self is to have any reality. The acorn becomes an oak; the kitten becomes a cat – automatically....But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them. People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day to day. These decisions require courage." [pp. 4-5]

And so for you and me, we become the men and women God has created us to be and wants us to be, not automatically, not simply by putting in our time, living it out day after day, but by our commitments, our decisions, our passions: for this truth, for this justice, for this family, for these children, for this person, for this city, for this church, for this Christ. We become who God wants us to be when deep in our souls we know that our lives matter and that our lives have meaning to the degree that we value them enough to invest them and live them fully and passionately and give them away. It requires commitment and conviction and always requires courage.

This weekend we pause to remember the hundreds of thousands of young Americans who gave their lives, in a moment of commitment and ultimate courage, laid down their lives for their comrades and their country.

And just this week in the midst of the dreadful events in Oregon, as another disturbed adolescent with too easy access to too many guns and surrounded by too many adults without the courage to tell the truth about this nightmare of violence and killing (that it is a result of the easy access to guns), walked into school and started firing. In the midst of it all, there was a moment of shining humanity, an incident of beauty and commitment. Seventeen year-old Jacob Ryker stood up in the cafeteria and took a bullet to his chest and then kept right on coming and tackled the shooter. And his 14 year-old brother, Joshua, piled on.

Jacob and Joshua – commitment – courage.

We become who we will be by our commitment and our courage.

It was a lesson I learned painfully, also from a college professor, Sidney Wise, with whom I was not particularly close, but who I have never forgotten because of the lesson. He died recently too and I wrote to his family to tell them what he taught me. He was my freshman political science professor. Our first paper was on American Constitutional Law. I had developed the unfortunate, but until that fateful occasion, always successful technique of relying on self-confidence and ability to express myself in writing instead of hard work. It worked – in high school. Professor Sidney Wise wrote with a blue felt-tip pen, just below the large 'F': "Mr. Buchanan, you are sitting on the curb, watching the parade go by."

What I learned, of course, was that adult life requires commitment and that if I was to become anything, or anyone, I was going to have to give something of my heart, my spirit, something like devotion, sacrifice, something like love.

"Stand up. Take your mat and walk."

And let's think about change. If his life was going to have any meaning at all, if there was any chance for wholeness and health, this man had to change, a lot, change his attitude, change his behavior, change his heart.

Max DePree, in his fine little book on leadership, *Leadership Jazz,* talks about how vulnerable leaders have to be to affect change. DePree writes both about organizations and executive leadership, but also about personal spirituality.

> "We are not free to choose to avoid dealing with change. The only thing to decide is how to deal with change once you create it yourself or once you find it staring you in the face." [p. 83]

It's always easier not to change anything, in your professional or your personal life. The weight of inertia is heavy for all of us. Churches, particularly, seem to have difficulty with change. The allure of the status quo is always strong. The seven last words of the church, Martin Marty says, will be "We never did it that way before."

"Stand up. Take your mat and walk."

And let's think about faith. Is it possible that something like what happened to that man might happen to me? Is it possible that God might reach down into my life while I'm sitting in church on Sunday morning and demand a response of some kind from me? Is it possible that this intrusive grace of God (and that's what this story is about – grace that intrudes on a comfortably passive life, this uninvited and unexpected and even unwelcome intrusion of Jesus Christ in the man's life), has happened to me, is happening to me?

Is it possible that God's almost indiscriminate goodness comes to me not because I asked for it, or want it, but because it is the nature of God to come to the world and to each of us personally and that God wants some response, some first step, some "yes?"

In her wonderful new book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris talks about her own response to God's grace and her return to faith. Norris writes:

> "An alert human infant – at about one month of age, begins to build a vocabulary....Eventually, the rudiments of words come: often 'Mama,' 'Dada,' 'me,' and the all-powerful 'No!' An unqualified 'yes' is a harder sell, to both children and adults. To say 'yes' is to make a leap of faith, to risk oneself in a new and often scary relationship. Not being quite sure of what we are doing, or where it will lead us, we try on assent, we commit ourselves to affirmation. With luck, we find that our efforts are rewarded. The vocabulary of faith begins." [Preface]

So the story, as often happens, begins to include you and me and we see the possibility that God touches our lives and in fact comes into them, just as Jesus intruded into the man's comfortable life and asks for change, for commitment, for perhaps nothing more than a "yes" rather than the "maybe" or "later" that we have been saying all these years.

Near the end of their Tuesday mornings, Mitch and Morrie talked about The Fear of Aging. Now Morrie is very sick and totally dependent on others for all his needs – even sitting up in bed.

> Morrie says, "I embrace aging. As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at twenty-two you'd always be as ignorant as you were at twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know – it's growth."
>
> Mitch asks, "If aging were so valuable, why do people always say, 'Oh, if I were young again?' You never hear people say, 'I wish I were 65!'"
>
> Morrie smiled. "You know what that reflects? Unsatisfied lives. Unfulfilled lives. Lives that haven't found meaning. Because if you've found meaning in your life, you don't want to go back. You want to go forward. You want to see more, do more. You can't wait to be sixty-five." [p. 118]

After the fourteenth Tuesday, during which they said good-bye, Morrie died.

Mitch Albom wrote, "If Professor Morris Schwartz taught me anything at all, it was this: there is no such thing as 'too late' in life." [p. 190]

The author concludes with a question for his readers:

> "Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back." [p. 192]

Well, yes, I thought, I have. Professor Wise. There were others, of course, and you have your teachers too. But ultimately, I thought, there is one like that, who sees you and me for what we could be, who loves you unconditionally, loves you enough to intrude into your comfortable life, loves you enough to want you to change what needs changing, one who says to you, this day:

> "Stand up. Take your mat and walk."

Jesus Christ is his name. Amen.